



Exploring tough questions
facing youth today

THE RADICAL REIGN

Parables of Jesus



The Pastoral Center

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Bible-based Explorations of Issues Facing Youth

» OVERVIEW

When conversing online, the acronym IRL stands for “in real life.” The virtual world of social media, text chats, blogs, and more have the power to remove us from the real world. What we experience online can skew our perspective on what it means to be human. It can numb us, incite us, distract us, depress us, confuse us, and make us rude or impatient. Strangely, this supposedly “social” and “connected” technology can profoundly disconnect us from others.

Religious faith can also place us in a bubble, especially when it distances us from others. When we keep the prophetic message at a safe distance, obscured in theological language and abstractions, we are missing the whole point. And when we see our parish as an insider club that serves itself, we can forget the radically inclusive message entrusted to us: God’s love is for *everyone*, and God expects us to transform the *whole world* through that love.

Through the incarnation, God showed up in the real world to show us that our faith is not just about talking the talk, but also walking the walk. It can be risky. It can be confusing. It can hurt. But living out our faith can also bring us great purpose, peace, and joy.

This series connects the Bible with the tough questions that youth (and adults) encounter in their neighborhood, in school, among friends, and even online. This process will help you as a leader break open these issues in a fun and meaningful way, sparking conversation and the kind of life change Jesus invites us to embrace.

» THE ROLE OF PARENTS

As children enter middle school and high school, they become more independent, self-reliant, and, well, self-centered. This can bring parents to make assumptions that this is the time to step back, giving their child more space to form their identity. While there is truth to that at some level (adolescents definitely shouldn’t be smothered), this is a stage of life when parents should in fact *lean in*. The apparent confidence and bluster youth show on the outside can mask the insecurity and confusion on the inside. Youth need their parents to be involved more than ever.

» WHOLE FAMILY FORMATION

Parents are the primary teachers of their own children, and parishes are waking up to the fact that faith formation programs need to bring parents into the process if they hope to see faith passed on to the next generation. Recent studies give us more and more evidence that the role of parents is the most important factor in determining whether a child will embrace faith as they move toward adulthood. Research from the Center for the Applied Research on the Apostolate shows that parents who talk about their faith and show through their actions that their faith is important to them are more likely to have children who remain Catholic.

More about Whole Family Formation >>>

To learn more about how your parish can take a comprehensive whole family approach to faith formation, visit GrowingUpCatholic.com.



While whole family events with elementary-aged children are on the rise, the role of parents can be an afterthought in youth ministry. We have designed the sessions in this series to work with or without parents present, and we encourage you to offer them as parent-child events.

If you choose to involve parents, it is important to consider before each session how to best do so. Many of the activities in this series are high-energy, creative, or silly. Some parents may need some encouragement to get out of their heads and have fun with the group. A few activities involving physical contact would be inappropriate for parents and youth to participate together, and we have noted them as such.

There are a number of ways to approach discussions with parent participation. Unless you have a small group, you will likely want to break into smaller groups for conversation. Some youth may be self-conscious and unable to be completely honest and open in a group situation with a parent present. For this reason, you may choose in some cases to assign parents to different groups from their own children, or to have separate parent and child groups altogether. Be sure to cover expectations around confidentiality. It is inappropriate for a parent (or youth) to share with another parent what their child said in a small group.

Note that even if parents and their children do not share all conversations together in the session, they will still have a valuable shared experience and can have extended conversations about it later.

>> **THANK YOU**

The role you play in gathering, animating, praying with, and forming youth is a valuable one. Thank you for all you do to serve the church and its families!

THE RADICAL REIGN

Parables of Jesus

INTRODUCTION

Parables are “I” openers. First they get our attention with their controversial, “against the grain” style and message. Then they open up our spiritual “eyes” and reveal, with startling clarity, the nature of God and the reign of Heaven. Perhaps the most amazing thing about the parables is that they have the power to either strengthen faith and move us closer to reign-of-God ideals, OR they can harden us in our unbelief. In either case, Jesus’ parables always call for personal decision, related to every area of our life with God.

Jesus turned people’s worlds upside down when he told them—through parables—what God is really like. He revealed God’s reign as radically different from the world we live in. What’s so different about it?

First, **God’s love is unconditional**. Even though grace may be a good idea, some people may wish God would give it out sparingly, and to those who earn it. Yet the parable of the vineyard workers and the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin teach that no one has more access to God than another, and people can do nothing to earn that love.

Second, **the call to live in the radical reign is being sounded NOW**. In the parable of the great feast, Jesus confronted the human tendency to ignore a gracious invitation from God. We find other needs and desires to be more pressing. Yet the moment of decision for the reign of God keeps confronting us.

Third, **we can’t go it alone**. Against the backdrop of the North American worship of rugged individualism, we find instead that our true source of life comes from being connected—to the Vine and to the other branches.

Fourth, **the gospel is essentially the subversion of the usual order**. Jesus’ parables not only talked about the radical reign of God, they called for action, a radical way of living. Through the parables of the Pharisee and the tax collector and the good Samaritan, Jesus called us to upend our traditional perspective, because “the last will be first and the first last.”

The people who heard Jesus speak so long ago were hardly different from us in their need for a vibrant spiritual life. Some drank up his words with thirsty souls, and longed for more. Others were turned off by his radical statements about God’s way of loving and judging. How will it be with you and your group? Let those who have eyes truly see!

“Through its concreteness the language of Jesus captures our attention, through its rhythmic cadences it resonates in our memories, and through its puzzles and enigmas it engages our quest for understanding.”

John R. Donahue, S.J.,
The Gospel in Parable





EXTENDER SESSION

Most units include one extender session, with suggestions for special activities related to the issue of the unit. Extender sessions help accommodate the diversity of parish schedules. Since each unit is undated, youth may study units in their entirety and still participate in special events of the parish that get scheduled simultaneously with youth group time. Extender sessions can be used anytime, but the one for this unit best follows **Session 4**. Calculate now whether or not you will be using the extender session.



THE TEACHING PLAN: The parts of the session guide

» **Faith story.** The session is rooted in this Bible passage.

» **Faith focus.** This is the story of the passage in a nutshell.

» **Session goal.** The entire session is built around this goal. What changes—in knowledge, attitude, and/or action—do you desire in your group?

» **Materials needed and advance preparation.** This is what you will need if the session is to go smoothly. You'll feel more at ease if you've taken care of these details before you meet your group.

» FROM LIFE TO BIBLE TO LIFE

The teaching plan we use is called *life-centered*. However, when we write each session, we always begin with Scripture. We ask, what does this particular passage say, especially to youth? Each teaching session moves from life to Bible to life. So the Bible is really at the center of this way of teaching.

In every session we try to hit upon a tough question that participants might ask. Find out what questions on this issue are important for your group. Feel free to bring your own input and invite your group members to add their own experiences.

» TEACHING THE SESSION

The five step-by-step movements will carry you from *life to the Bible and back to life*. Each session takes about 45 to 50 minutes. If there is a handout sheet for the session, take note of any complementary activities and stories.

1. Focus. This activity is intended to create a friendly climate within the group and to draw attention to the issue.

2. Connect. Talking, drawing, role playing, and other activities invite participants to express their own life experience about the issue. Also use memory, reason, or imagination to get the group thinking about *why* they view the issue the way they do.

3. Explore the Bible. With a minimum of lecturing, dig into the faith story and search for answers to questions raised in the first activities. The

Insights from Scripture section will help clarify the faith story. Help participants discover how the faith community understands the Bible passage.

4. Apply the faith story. This is the “aha!” moment when participants realize the faith story has wisdom for *their* lives.

5. Respond. What will the group do about the issue in light of what they have learned from their own experiences set alongside the faith story? At this point, the faith story becomes lived rather than a mere intellectual exercise.

» LOOK AHEAD

Here are reminders for what you need to do for the next session or two.

» INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE

Here is a resource for Explore the Bible. Don't try to use all the material given. Take what you need to lead the session and answer questions your group may have. Let the Insights section inspire you to think and study more about the Bible passage for the session.

» **HANDOUT SHEETS**

Occasionally, there will be a handout sheet to complement your session. If you choose to use this, you will need to make enough copies for the group. These sheets may include questions, stories, agree/disagree exercises, charts, pictures, and other materials to stimulate your group to think and discuss.

Generally, no participant preparation is required unless the session plan calls for you to contact selected group members for specific tasks.

SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE

SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE

»» **SESSION 1**

NO FAIR! »»»

»» **KEY VERSE**

“These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” (Matthew 20:12)

»» **FAITH STORY**

Matthew 19:27–20:15 (The parable of the vineyard workers)

»» **FAITH FOCUS**

Just after Jesus told a rich young man to sell his possessions in order to have treasure in heaven, Peter asked, “What’s in it for us, who *do* leave everything to follow?” Jesus responded with the **parable of the vineyard workers**.

In our relationship with God, our acceptance is not based on how hard we work. It is based purely on God’s desire to show us divine love. No one has more access to the love of God than another, and people can do nothing to earn that love. For youth, who are competing on many fronts, this parable can be an important insight into the unconditional quality of God’s love.

»» **SESSION GOAL**

As participants approach their lives with a “get the best bang for the buck” mentality, help them confront the parable’s radical message of God’s unconditional love.

»» **Materials needed and advance preparation**

- Chalkboard/chalk or newsprint/markers
- Paper and pencils
- Prepare sign-up sheets (see Focus, *Option A*)
- Construction paper and crayons (see Respond)
- Mini-candy bars or mini-cookies (see Respond, *Option B*)



TEACHING PLAN

1. FOCUS 7-8 minutes

»» **Option A** (for indoor setting):

Ask participants to imagine that the church board has given them the task of remodeling (or decorating) their meeting room—for pay! The whole group receives \$1,000. Give the group 3-4 minutes to generate a list about what tasks they’d want to have done (paint, rearrange furniture, new floor, etc.). Then pass around sign-up sheets for getting the work done. Divide the sign-up sheets in half lengthwise, and put headings at the top:

GIRLS

(receive \$30 for every hour worked)

GUYS

(receive \$30 for every 4 hours worked)

Have the girls sign up on one side, and the guys on the other. When someone complains about the unfairness of the wages, let them grumble a bit, then point out that everyone should be thankful for getting paid at all for decorating their room! Then move right into the discussion on fairness in Connect.

» **Option B** (for camp/retreat setting):

Choose one or more of the following tasks (or come up with one of your own) as a contest:

- *whoever swims the most miles*
- *whoever walks/hikes the most miles*
- *whoever reads the most Bible verses*

Announce that you will be awarding a prize (monetary, honorary, culinary) to the person who wins the contest. Make a big deal of the task/contest. This could even be over a period of days, all leading up to this session. When you give out the prize, however, award it first to the person who won the contest, then **give the same prize** to everyone else in the group. Use this to generate a discussion about fairness. How do the people who *didn't* win the contest feel? How does the person who won the contest feel?

2. **CONNECT** 5-8 minutes

Ask participants about times when they have felt taken advantage of in the area of “workload.” For instance, have they ever felt they got paid less than another person did for an equal amount of work? Can they recall times when they were asked to do work that others didn’t have to do? How did they feel about that? In other words: *When did you most feel, “Hey! No fair! I’m having to do all this, and they don’t have to do **anything!**”* Likely such situations have occurred among siblings. Invite people to tell their stories. Then follow up with these questions: *Is it possible to make sure that life is always fair? Suppose life really were strictly fair and just—everybody always got exactly what they deserved. What would that kind of world look like? Would anything be missing?*

Shift to the next activity by saying: *We all want things to be fair in this life. but even if we could guarantee perfect fairness and get exactly what we deserve, we’d be missing something—the opportunity to be given something we **DON’T** deserve! Let’s find out more....*

3. **EXPLORE THE BIBLE** 10-12 minutes

Choose a way to designate the categories FAIR and NO FAIR! at opposite sides of the room. Then prepare participants to hear Matthew 19:27–20:15 by giving them a listening assignment. As you read, they are to make a mental note of *at least one thing in the passage that they would describe as either FAIR or NO FAIR*. After the reading they should move to one end of the room and be ready to tell about their FAIR/NO FAIR reaction.

Now read aloud the Bible passage. After participants move to the ends of the room, ask:

- *What did you think was FAIR? NO FAIR?*
- *What was the point of Jesus’ story?* (Possible answers: everyone is equal before God; all kinds of work are essentially the same in God’s eyes; divine generosity is available to all who look for it)
- *What either encourages you or bothers you about this “point”?*
- *Is God fair or unfair in this story? Tell why you think so. Are there other words to describe how God acts in this parable, besides fair and unfair?* (Possible answers: merciful, graceful, generous)

Draw on the material in Insights from Scripture to summarize the basic message of the parable. Say something like: *God is generous in ways that may strike us as “unfair”—one-hour workers getting a full day’s pay! However, in our relationship with God, our acceptance is not based on how hard we work. It is based purely on God’s desire to show us divine love. Actually, we can be thankful that strict justice doesn’t prevail!*

If you have time, follow up with one more discussion question: *Why should we be “good workers,” if just about anyone will get the same “pay”?*

4. **APPLY** 15 minutes

» **Option A:** Tell the group to think about raising money to go to a youth gathering. Have them work together to decide what they would do to raise money.

Then—as individuals, pairs, or small groups—participants should decide these three things (write them on the board):

- What tasks they would want done
- How they would divide up the responsibilities fairly (exactly equally, considering differences in strength, ability, etc.)
- How they would divide the money (i.e., who gets how much, and when?)

Circulate among the participants to answer questions and give further guidance as they work. When everyone has come up with some ideas, ask: *WHY do you feel your plan would be a fair way to accomplish this work? What things could happen that might make it unfair?* (For example: Some kids might not show up to work; others might goof off. Or some might be underpaid, even though they put in extra effort.) *Since this work is for a special youth gathering, would it matter to you if the money distribution was fair or unfair? Why or why not?*

» **Option B:** If you have a sports-oriented group, enact a “generic” sports contract case. Any sports fan will quickly recognize the constant battle between sports superstars and their team owners to renegotiate their contracts as rookies come into the league. Divide into two “teams,” **players** and **owners**. Then bring up a recent case in point, with real names, if possible, which will very likely go like this:

LB.J. Superstar signed a contract three years ago for 7 million dollars over the next five years. He was very happy for the first two years of the contract. Now, however, management has signed Mr. Awesome Rookie, right out of college, for a contract of 10 million dollars over four years.

Give the “players” team up to 30 seconds to respond to the “owners.” (Mr. Superstar might say some-thing like: “I’ve had a great two years. But Rookie hasn’t even played in the league yet! Why am I getting paid less? I want a new contract.”)

Then give the “owners” up to 30 seconds to respond. (This might go something like: “Hey, you liked the contract when you signed it. It was fair and generous. And a contract is a contract, so abide by it and like it. What we do with other players is none of your business.”)

Then discuss: *How is this sports contract conflict like, and unlike, what happens in Jesus’ parable?*

»»» **LOOK AHEAD**

For the next session, develop a list of injuries that might come into an emergency room. In advance, contact a nurse or doctor in your congregation and ask them to arrange your list in a triage order (see the triage explanation in Session 2). Also, make homemade transfer ink (Respond, *Option B*).





“The parable speaks of how this new reality [of God’s boundless generosity] is breaking into the weariness and hopelessness of the people of God. It is an outrageous process. It makes the lowest into the highest; it awakens deep anxieties; it causes scandal. But it also allows hope to bloom and bestows deep joy.”

Gerhard Lohfink
Jesus of Nazareth



5. RESPOND 5-10 minutes

» **Option A:** Make “Grace in My Life” statements. Hand each person a piece of construction paper, and make crayons or markers available. Invite everyone to make an artistic acrostic (ready to decorate the walls) with the three initials of their first, middle, and last names. Stipulate that the statements must be about things in their life, or about them, that indicate the workings of God’s grace. For example:

- G = God’s child
- A = Always forgiven
- W = Wonderful friends

Hang the Grace Acrostics on the walls and offer a closing prayer.

» **Option B:** For a snack, tell people you are going to hand out mini-candy bars (or, for a larger group, use mini-cookies). Let participants watch you take out a grocery bag and count out (loudly and carefully) the same amount of bars or cookies as the number of group members. Lay the pieces out on a table, and then say: “Starting with (*name of a participant*), come get your snack.”

When “Sue” takes only one of the pieces (because you’ve counted out the same number as the number of people in the group), let her know that her portion *is the whole amount placed on the table*. Then, one at a time, give everyone else *that same number of pieces*.

Close by offering a prayer of thanks for God’s surprising grace!



INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE

Just after Jesus spoke to the rich young man (in Matt. 19:16-26), Peter piped up, “We have left everything and followed you! What then will we have?” If giving up earthly riches was the requirement, then surely the disciples easily qualified for the maximum reward.

So Jesus told his disciples a story, using commonplace props, to help them see that God’s favor cannot be earned. In the parable of the vineyard workers (found only in Matthew), God’s love is given freely and unconditionally to all who present themselves.

» THE ECCENTRIC FARMER

In the Middle East, grapes normally ripened at the end of September and the rains came soon after—heavy rains that could devastate the entire crop. It was a race to get the harvest in. The vineyard owner went to the labor pool at 6 a.m. (sunrise, or the first hour, in the Jewish way of reckoning). He went again at 9 a.m., noon, 3 p.m., and 5 p.m., looking for anyone willing to work, for any length of time.

When it came time to disperse the pay, the last paid naturally expected more, since they had seen the other workers receiving a full day’s wage. Yet—surprise!—the owner’s heart was apparently touched. Or maybe he was “touched in the head.” Obviously, one hour’s worth of pay wouldn’t feed a worker’s family, and the owner proved to be generous to those who worked a partial day, even as little as an hour.

» IDENTIFYING THE CONNECTIONS

Though a parable typically makes only one main point, we can make certain figurative connections in this way:

- **Hours** = measures of accomplishment
- **Field** = Heaven
- **Landowner** = metaphor for God
- **Marketplace** = labor pool (the lowest class of workers, whose daily lives were more precarious than even slaves, who at least had some connection to a family)

The most intriguing question of identity is, of course, *Who are the workers?* Bible scholars raise at least three possible interpretations:

1. The groups represent a progression of generations in God's salvation history, with Christians or Gentiles symbolized as the eleventh-hour workers.
2. The different worker groups signify the different stages of life when people come to belief.
3. The workers are a symbol of the development of the Christian church. The older churches are the early morning workers and younger churches are the later arrivals.

As interesting as it may be to speculate on such symbols, it is vastly more important to grasp the point Jesus was making about the nature of God.

» WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

God is not "fair." Regardless of whether you and your group identify with the "early" workers or the "late" workers, this parable hits hard. Issues of "fairness" can wrench our stomachs. It's hard to swallow the idea that God could give equal pay for unequal labor. It's the same issue the elder brother had to deal with in the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32)—"Why should I work my tail off and never get offered a party, when my no-account brother, who only lately showed any family loyalty, gets the fatted calf?"

But neither the boys' father nor the vineyard owner was a stingy tyrant abusing his workers. The issue of fairness in these cases was that both the father and the owner were being *too* fair. What a wake-up call to the older brother! What a twist on an old labor-versus-owners story! And how did the father respond? "You've always had access to me and to my wealth. Why do you begrudge your brother my love?" People believe God gives out grace, but perhaps they'd like to see God give it out sparingly, "fairly," and according to their own ideas of deserving.

» DIVINE GENEROSITY

Is the point then that everyone is equal before God? Or that all kinds of work for God are essentially the same? Perhaps. But it seems better to focus on something even more basic: God goes beyond the normal conventions of fairness—divine generosity is available to all who look for it. This may indeed strike us as radical, perhaps even "unfair." But could we survive if it were any other way? For all of us have "become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth" (Is. 64:6) and "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Thank God that divine love is radically generous. Those who give their whole lives to God receive divine generosity and companionship all that time. And those who come later are invited in with the same promises and love.